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Trump, Europe, and Iran

by Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: US President Donald Trump's staunch opposition to the nuclear agreement with Iran (the JCPOA) has sparked a serious transatlantic rift. The EU is, however, attempting to balance its appetite for business with an examination of security risks. In so doing, it is slowly awakening to Israeli and Sunni Arab sensitivities regarding Tehran's hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East.

When US President Donald Trump [decertified the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\) in October 2017](#), the EU thought a "solved" problem had returned to the agenda for no real reason. It almost immediately issued a [statement](#) calling the JCPOA "a key element of the nuclear non-proliferation global architecture and crucial for the security of the region" and encouraged the US to maintain it.

From a European perspective, though issues related to Iranian ballistic missiles as well as rising tensions in the region were matters of concern, they were to be addressed "outside the JCPOA." In January 2018, [following another speech by Trump on Iran](#) that essentially issued an ultimatum to Europeans that they reconsider their approach, High Representative Federica Mogherini said: "[The deal is working; it is delivering on its main goal, which means keeping the Iranian nuclear program in check and under close surveillance.](#)"

[Trump's decision to end US participation in the "unacceptable" Iran deal](#), which took place on May 8, 2018, led Germany, France, and the UK [to express "regret" and "concern."](#) The three countries, and the EU on the whole, seek to ensure that the structures of the JCPOA remain intact.

On May 15, Mogherini met with the foreign ministers of France, Germany, the UK, and Iran to discuss the future of the deal and [expressed confidence that it](#)

[could stay in place](#) despite the difficulty of the task. She is leading the effort [to put complementary mechanisms and measures](#) in place at both the EU level and the national level to protect the economic operators of European member states.

European trade and investment in Iran moved forward quickly following the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. In December 2016, Airbus, the French aerospace pioneer, [signed a contract with Iran Air](#) for 100 aircraft. In July 2017, energy colossus Total and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) [agreed to collaborate on the development and production of phase 11 of South Pars](#), the world's largest gas field. In August 2017, the German automobile group [Volkswagen returned to the Iranian market](#) after 17 years and began selling vehicles. In July 2017, Italian railway company [Ferrovie dello Stato inked an accord with Iran Railways](#) to build a high-speed railway between Qom and Arak. Also, [Reuters revealed in September 2017](#) that London-based renewables developer Quercus Investment Partners Ltd. had plans to invest over half a billion euros in a solar power project in Iran.

The determination of European companies to access new markets is understandable, especially in view of Europe's current anemic growth. To achieve this goal, they are pushing their respective governments to open up powerful channels such as chambers of commerce and other trade representations. The governments in question tend to sideline security risks for the sake of ephemeral economic benefits and the support of industries in national elections.

The long-term winner of this process is Tehran, which is exploiting European business fever to present itself as a normal international interlocutor – if not to legitimize its position as a normal nuclear power – and advance its geopolitical agenda in the Middle East. In turning a blind eye to the potential transformation of the region should Tehran achieve its hegemonic ambitions, the EU is postponing difficult foreign policy decisions. The clock cannot be turned back, however.

The EU-US disagreement on the JCPOA is placed by most within the general context of the deterioration of transatlantic relations following Trump's election. The nuclear deal is not the only example of that deterioration. Trump's pressure on NATO European member states to increase their contributions to the defense budget, his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, and his indifferent and at times scornful stance regarding the project of European integration all contribute to the hostility.

However, Trump's tough stand on Iran has offered the EU a good opportunity to look beyond transatlantic relations and acknowledge Israeli and Sunni Arab security concerns. A November 2017 [BESA online debate](#) on "what happens

next” after the JCPOA made the point that notwithstanding the ultimate fate of the deal, its flaws can now be more easily exposed. This is indeed beginning to happen. France, Germany, and Britain are taking some initial steps to restrain Iranian influence, though they disagree with Trump’s Iran policy.

After January, the US and the EU engaged in [diplomatic talks](#) to add new sanctions and “fix” the deal. These talks did not prevent Trump from announcing the US withdrawal, but they demonstrated that Europe would no longer ignore Tehran’s hegemonic drive. Following their February meeting in Berlin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Theresa May [expressed their readiness](#) to take further appropriate measures to tackle issues “about Iran’s destabilizing activity in the Middle East.”

On the same wavelength, during an [interview on Fox News](#) ahead of his April visit with his US counterpart, French President Emmanuel Macron said he was “not satisfied with the situation with Iran” and “want[ed] to fight against ballistic missiles [and] contain their influence in the region.” Richard Goldberg wrote in [Politico](#) that French officials privately concede the flaws of the deal: the missiles, the inspections, the sunsets, and the loss of economic leverage over Iran’s regional expansion.

Even the joint statement of May, Merkel, and Macron issued immediately after the US withdrawal referred to their concerns “about Iran’s ballistic missile program and its destabilizing regional activities, especially in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

At the time of this writing, details about measures specifically proposed by France, Germany, and Britain are only based on news agencies’ articles. In March, for example, [Reuters saw a document](#) suggesting that a list of Iranian persons and entities should be targeted. Along with the lack of information, another problem is that the remaining member states need to agree with the proposal for it to be practically implemented. Countries [such as Italy](#) remain skeptical, and the EU does not have a record of strong unity.

However disgruntled by Washington’s withdrawal from the JCPOA, the EU will scarcely react to potential American sanctions. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, for instance, [finds it difficult for his country to protect businesses](#). This will leave Europe no choice but to refocus on the security question in the short and medium term.

Israel’s sensitivity is now playing a role in the shaping of European foreign policy. Israeli politicians, academics, journalists, and researchers have warned for years about the risks stemming from the regional aspirations of the Islamic Republic in the Middle East. Their voices were not heard in most European

capitals, which were distracted by their appetite for business deals with Tehran. This is starting to change, and Trump deserves a good deal of the credit.

Dr George N. Tzogopoulos is a BESA Research Associate, Lecturer at the Democritus University of Thrace, and Visiting Lecturer at the European Institute of Nice.

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